

The Comfort of God
Isaiah 40:1-11
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Wow, I leave for one week and you all start Advent without me! I was sorry to not be with you last week, but Leigh and I enjoyed being home for Thanksgiving with our families. I see that you all didn't waste any time getting our church ready for the Advent season. Here we are at the second week of Advent, decorations up, tree trimmed, candles lit. And now we wait.

I have a lot of experience waiting. You see, I drive to and from Grayslake every day. My patience must not be what it should, because the helpful folks at the Illinois Department of Transportation have taken it upon themselves to give me ample opportunities to practice waiting with several thousand other commuters.

I was told when we were moving to Chicago that there are only two seasons here: winter and construction season. I would agree with that and would now argue that seasons come and go, but construction is a way of life. This is especially true for me since they've begun work on the tollway, one of the main routes I travel. I've tried to turn this negative into a positive by creating a game I liked to call, "Which lane will be closed today?" If I lose, I have to sit in traffic. If I win, I have to sit in traffic.

In our passage from Isaiah today, the prophet is also talking about doing some road construction. Did you catch that? "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."

To understand the importance of this road construction, we have to understand the road the Israelites have traveled thus far. The Israelites were in need of a smooth highway because their journey to this point had been filled with potholes and detours. After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, they were finally living in the Promised Land that God have given them. God kept God's end of the covenant, but the Israelites weren't keeping up their end. They were doing things that God had told them specifically not to do, like being greedy and worshipping idols.

So God is forced to carry out the punishment God told the Israelites would happen. God says in Isaiah, "The time will surely come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD."

That's exactly what happened. The Babylonians swept into the Promised Land, ransacked Jerusalem, and sent the Israelites into exile back in Babylon. There they waited and waited and waited for God to rescue them and deliver them back to their homeland.

That's the setting for the 40th chapter of Isaiah, which marks a major shift in the prophet's book. Up to this point the tone of Isaiah has been one of judgment, condemning the Israelites for their sins and shortcomings in the sight of God. But now, Isaiah speaks a different word, a word of hope to those who are waiting.

And they need it, because my guess is they're beginning to wonder if God has forgotten them. They're asking the question that we may have asked at one time or another: Can God really get me through this mess? Where is God in the midst of this

difficult time? We have all had times of spiritual exile, times when our faith felt barren, times when we were living in the wilderness, waiting for a voice to cry out.

I'm not sure what you are waiting for this Advent, but I can bet that most of us, if not all of us, are waiting for something. Maybe you're waiting for the financial markets to turn around. Or for the new president to take office. Maybe your wait is more personal, like waiting for a relationship to sprout new life out of dry ground or waiting for doctors to give you the answers you want. Or maybe you are just waiting for something different, for the tiniest in-breaking of God into our world, that glimpse that reminds us, in the midst of our tiresome travels, that God is indeed with us.

Isaiah speaks a word of hope to us. This passage is not about Israel's unreliability; it's about God's reliability. It's about how our unfaithfulness cannot nullify God's faithfulness. It's about how God can overcome our past and present circumstances to bring hope to our future. Remember the Israelites. They trampled on God's law, snubbed their nose in the face of God's goodness, ran roughshod over God's covenant, and yet God says, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for."

And now, the Israelites are preparing to journey back to their homeland, but they must make the trek over harsh desert land. Similarly, as we trek through Advent, there may be rough terrain for us to traverse. We may have to just sit and wait and as Tom Petty sang, "The waiting is the hardest part." Sometimes the hope that Advent promises makes the waiting that much harder. But here's the good news: God is preparing a way.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday our family was driving through Kentucky and Sydney was amazed to see how the roads had been made to go right through what she called "mountains." We don't have many mountains in Illinois, and there aren't that many in Kentucky, either, but there are some hills here and there. And the roads were made by blasting through the hills, leaving a rock wall on either side of the road.

That's what Isaiah is saying God does in our lives. God takes the hills and valleys, the rough spots and rugged places, and God finds a way through them. It may require some construction, maybe even a little spiritual dynamite to blast us out of our complacency, but God will find a way through. Whatever lies in front of us, whether it's a pothole or a speed bump or a mountain, our trust in God will help us through.

That is the message Christ brings us at Christmas. Notice that Mark's gospel doesn't start with the birth story of Jesus. There's no angel or shepherds or Mary or Joseph. Instead, there's John the Baptist, this rough, rugged, Grinch-like man, wearing dead animals and eating insects and proclaiming, "Prepare the way! Move it or lose it! Pay attention! There's something coming and you don't want to miss it." This Advent, we are called to prepare the way for the coming of Christ into this world, to become co-laborers on God's construction crew.

There's talk up in Grayslake of building another road that will ease some of the congestion along Route 120. But I don't think it will work. There's something called Parkinson's Law which states that work will expand to fill the time available for its completion. In other words, whatever free time you think have to get something done will be filled up with 20 other things. Likewise, more construction won't relieve congestion, it'll just give more drivers the opportunity to practice patience as they sit and wait on these shiny new streets.

But I believe Parkinson's Law might apply a different way here. Let's call it the Advent Law, and it goes like this: Hope will expand to fill the space made available in our hearts. If we only have a little room for hope, then that's all the hope Christmas will bring to us. But if we open our hearts and expand our capacity for hope, even or especially in the face of our own mountains, then hope will flood in, submerging us in love and grace and the belief that through Christ, God will make a way.

Isaiah writes a little later, "The Lord will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing."

The hope of Advent is that, as we wait in our deserts and try to scale our mountains, we will see God there, working with us to make a way through. No matter what we have done or not done, no matter how far we feel like we've run from God, no matter what challenges may lie ahead, Christ is coming this Christmas, the in-breaking of God into our world, the glimpse that reminds us that Jesus is indeed Emmanuel, "God with us."

But for that hope to take hold, we have to believe in it, to believe that God will be with us as we wait. We can choose to wait with despair or with negativity, and we can let those feelings darken our hearts. Or we can wait with hope and let the light of God fill us this Christmas. Christ is coming, and he is bringing us a new way of living, a new road to travel. Comfort, comfort my people. Here is your God!